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Monday, August 26, 2019

Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, and 66 Tribal Nations

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1 – Two Wildfires With Unknown Causes Burning Through Panhandle Brush Land, Texas Standard, 8/23/19
https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/two-wildfires-with-unknown-causes-burning-through-panhandle-brush-land/
The risk of wildfire is growing across Texas as hot and dry summer weather persists. And in some places, like West Texas and the Panhandle, fires have already consumed thousands of acres, and have even threatened some rural communities. Mike Dueitt is incident commander for one of the Southern Area Incident Management Teams that's part of the National Interagency Fire Center – a collaboration of response teams fighting these fires.

2 As downstream parishes watch, Corps reanalyzes expected impact of Baton Rouge drainage plan, Advocate, 8/25/19
https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/article_42d559a4-c084-11e9-be9d-5f0c37e7cc80.html
Neighboring parishes downstream from Baton Rouge have cast a wary eye on a $255 million Army Corps of Engineers project to clear out East Baton Rouge's waterways using federal dollars coming to the region after the August 2016 flood. Birthed after the 1983 flood but stalled for decades, the clearing and dredging plan passed an important milestone when authorities with the city-parish, Central, state and federal government announced this month that they'd found a way to finance a critical $65.6 million match.

3 – Baton Rouge groundwater commissioners grapple with size of aquifer problems, path for future, Advocate, 8/24/19
https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/article_40ec02e4-c68f-11e9-9142-c31fc51d212e.html
Members of a commission struggling to create a 50-year strategic plan for managing the region's aquifer tossed around a lot of ideas at a recent meeting for preserving the vital resource but endorsed no specific measures. The Capital Area Ground Water Conservation Commission, which manages the multiparish Southern Hills aquifer, has been under pressure from critics to move more aggressively to protect the region's drinking water supply from salt water intrusion coming from the south.

4 — Have Petrochemicals Doomed This Louisiana Community?, Nation, 8/26/19
https://www.thenation.com/article/st-james-louisiana-plastic-petrochemicals-buy-out/
The sunsets from Sharon Lavigne's home in St. James, Louisiana, are otherworldly. in the evenings, the 67-year-old can look out from her porch onto the 20 acres she inherited from her grandfather, the land bathed in orange and pink light. Once farmland, today it is mostly grass, which gives off a sweet, earthy smell as the heat leaves with the day. Interrupting the quiet murmur of cicadas is the steady clank and hum of machinery. Tall metal tanks are visible from Lavigne's property, with twisted pipes running between them and plumes of white smoke curling above.

5 — School at centre of Guardian's Cancer Town series may move students due to air pollution, Guardian, 8/24/19
https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/24/reserve-louisiana-elementary-school-air-pollution
Local officials in Reserve, Louisiana, are examining the prospect of removing pupils from an elementary school situated a few hundred feet from a chemical plant that presents the highest risk of cancer due to airborne toxins anywhere in America, the Guardian has learned. The Fifth Ward elementary school, which educates close to 500 students aged up to 10 years old, has become a focal point in environmental activism in Reserve after emissions of a likely carcinogen, chloroprene, emitted by the nearby plant have been recorded at the school at levels hundreds of times above the safe limit recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

6 — Feds settle with supermarket group over clean air violations, KTBS, 8/23/19
https://www.ktbs.com/news/louisiana/feds-settle-with-supermarket-group-over-clean-air-violations/article_4ae60585-69bc-5cc0-9f1b-1c94595c6443.html
A supermarket company has agreed to reduce emissions of ozone-depleting gases from refrigeration equipment at more than 500 stores in seven southeastern states, federal authorities said Friday. The Department of Justice and the Environmental Protection Agency reached the agreement with Southeastern Grocers Inc. and its subsidiaries to resolve violations of the Clean Air Act, according to a DOJ news release.

7 – U.S. needs to develop a national recycling strategy, Albuquerque Journal, 8/26/19
https://www.abqjournal.com/1358184/us-needs-to-develop-a-national-recycling-strategy.html
On June 29, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed an amendment sponsored by Rep. Haley Stevens of Michigan that was part of a larger bill. The amendment directs the Environmental Protection Agency to use its funding to create a national recycling strategy that will ensure the long-term economic and environmental viability of recycling programs at the local level.

8 — NMED, Picuris seek tips on dumping of sewage in Rio Pueblo, Albuquerque Journal, 8/23/19
https://www.abqjournal.com/1357572/nmed-picuris-seek-tips-on-dumping-of-sewage-in-rio-pueblo.html
The New Mexico Environment Department and Picuris Pueblo are seeking information on illegal dumping of raw sewage into the Rio Pueblo. Picuris Pueblo recently found evidence of raw sewage in the Rio Pueblo. (Image source: NM Environment Department). Picuris Pueblo found evidence of toilet paper and other solids in the river last week, and contacted NMED to report the contamination.

9 — A long road to remediation for hexavalent chromium plume near Los Alamos, NM Political Report, 8/26/19
http://nmpoliticalreport.com/2019/08/26/a-long-road-to-remediation-for-hexavalent-chromium-plume-near-los-alamos/
In the years between 1956 and 1972, thousands of kilograms of chemical called hexavalent chromium was released into a canyon near Los Alamos. Some of the contaminant filtered through the soils of the area and was consequently converted to trivalent chromium, a far less dangerous iteration of the chemical. But at least 2,000 kg of hexavalent chromium has remained in the environment, moving through the canyonlands that surround Los Alamos for decades. Today, the contamination is settled atop an aquifer in a plume, and the chemical is now present within the first 100 feet of the water table in the area of the plume.

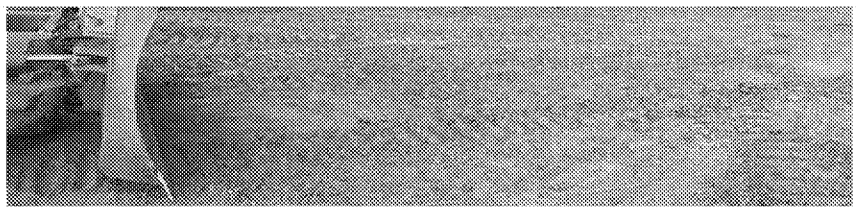
Two Wildfires With Unknown Causes Burning Through Panhandle Brush Land

Fire investigators haven't ruled out lighting as a potential cause because of some recent "dry" thunderstorms. And some small towns and cities are at risk.

Two Wildfires With Unknown Causes Burning Through Panhandle Brush Land
August 23, 2019

TEXAS STANDARD
THE NATIONAL DAILY NEWS SHOW OF TEXAS

By Jill Ament | August 23, 2019 11:04 am
Energy & Environment



Courtesy of National Wildfire Coordinating Group

The Copper Breaks fire in Hardeman County.

The risk of wildfire is growing across Texas as hot and dry summer weather persists. And in some places, like West Texas and the Panhandle, fires have already consumed thousands of acres, and have even threatened some rural communities.

Mike Dueitt is incident commander for one of the Southern Area Incident Management Teams that's part of the National Interagency Fire Center – a collaboration of response teams fighting these fires. He says his team first went to fight the Copper Breaks fire in Hardeman County. A couple of days later, a fire started in Foard County.

"Both of these fires are in the Pease River drainage, and in some really rugged country," Dueitt says. "A lot of cedar and brush land that's in that drainage and really causing some problems with getting equipment and resources in there to be able to get a control line around these fires."

– How Dueitt's team is trying to contain the fires before next week's hot weather

Written by Caroline Covington.

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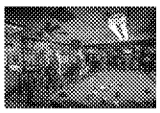
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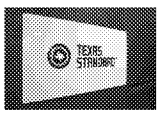
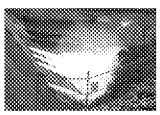

Texas Standard For August 23, 2019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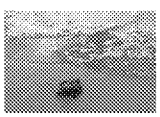
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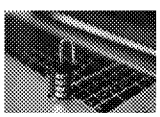
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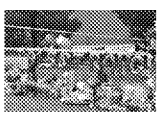
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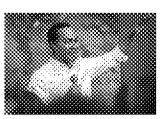
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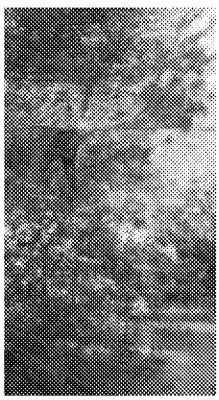

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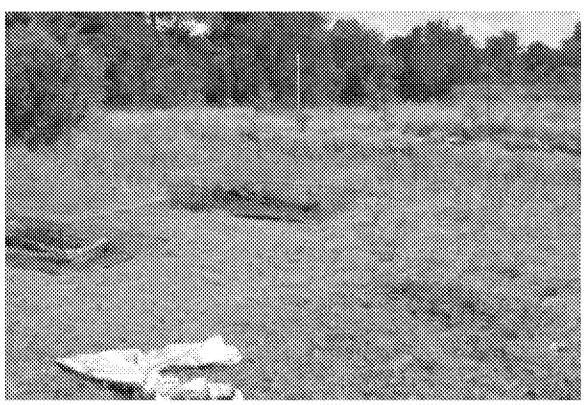

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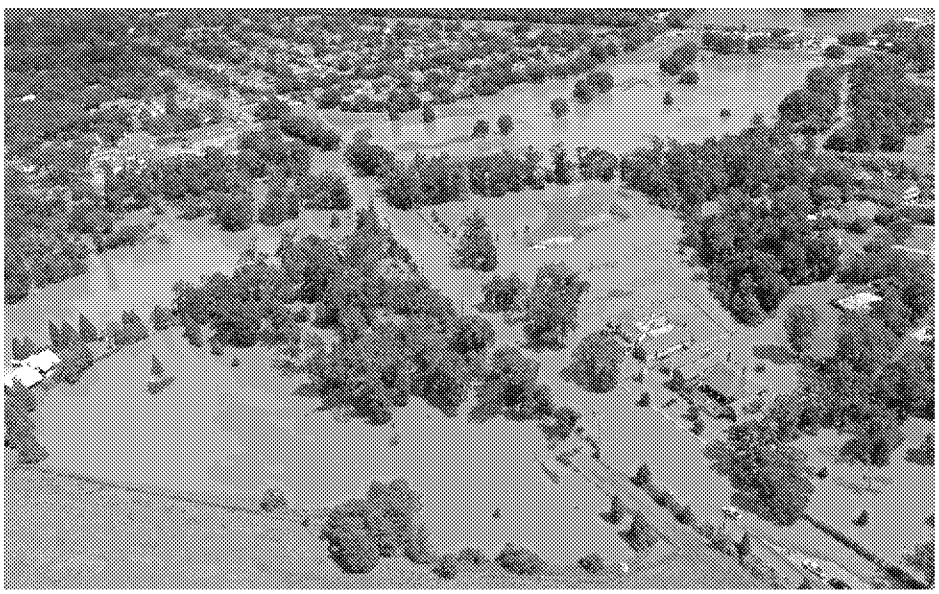
As downstream parishes watch, Corps reanalyzes expected impact of Baton Rouge drainage plan

BY DAVID J. MITCHELL | STAFF WRITER AUG 25, 2019 - 2:31 PM



Old Perkins Road is under due to Bayou Manchac. Santa Maria Subdivision is at top. Aerials of severe weather flooding in Ascension and East Baton Rouge Parish on Monday August 15, 2016.

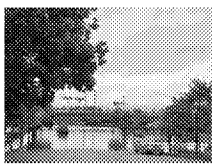
Advocate staff photo by BILL FEIG

David Mitchell

Neighboring parishes downstream from Baton Rouge have cast a wary eye on a $255 million Army Corps of Engineers project to clear out East Baton Rouge's waterways using federal dollars coming to the region after the August 2016 flood.

Birthed after the 1983 flood but stalled for decades, the clearing and dredging plan passed an important milestone when authorities with the city-parish, Central, state and federal government announced this month that they'd found a way to finance a critical $65.6 million match.

Gov. John Bel Edwards committed the biggest share of the upfront money needed, $40 million, as a deadline to tie dollars to the project drew near. The Metro Council is set for a vote Wednesday on its $12.5 million share.



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Major drainage project announced for East Baton Rouge; 'help is indeed on the way'

The project calls for clearing, dredging and widening 66 miles of creeks and bayous in East Baton Rouge Parish. The Corps had recommended the project as feasible in July 1995 after more than a decade of study, but without money then to make it a reality.

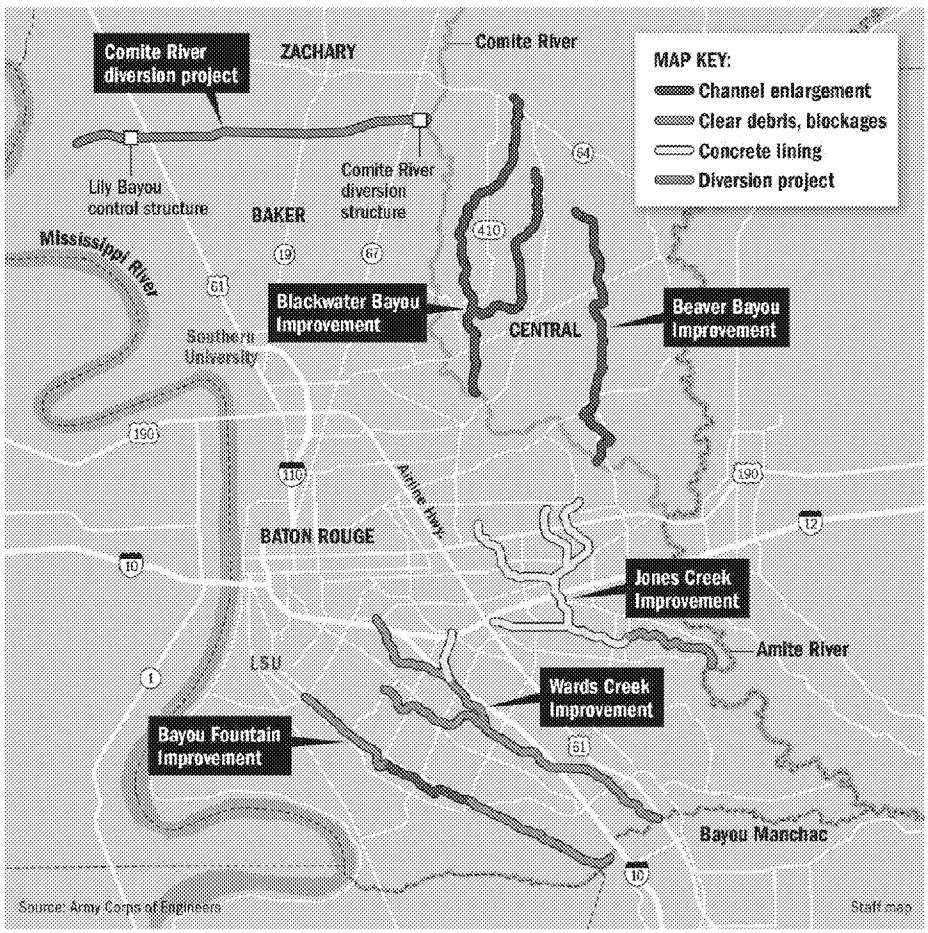
The work on Beaver and Blackwater bayous in the Central area and on Bayou Fountain and Jones and Ward creeks and their tributaries in the southern part of the parish is aimed at allowing water to move more quickly downstream into the Amite River and Bayou Manchac.

About 17 miles of those waterways would also be lined with concrete, a measure aimed at controlling erosion and speeding the flow of water.

Some officials in Ascension and Livingston parishes say they're worried about the possible impact but are withholding judgment as the Corps of Engineers reanalyzes the plan 25 years after finding its downstream effects would be minimal. Results are expected next month.

"We're kind of waiting to see and hear if there is going to be any impact," Livingston Parish President Layton Ricks said.

City-parish officials say they should be able to take advantage of an opportunity to reduce flood risk in East Baton Rouge as other parishes have but have promised to mitigate any impact downstream, possibly with regional retention areas to hold back some runoff and release it slowly.



A $255 million plan to drain East Baton Rouge Parish: With help from Congress, East Baton Rouge Parish is planning a major clean out of key waterways that drain the parish, but downstream parishes are concerned the water will flood their residents. In 1995, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers found a minimal impact, but the Corps is reevaluating its analysis in light of the growth in the region. The 12-mile Comite River Diversion Canal is a separate Corps project already underway.

"I want to be sure that we're good neighbors, not a problem," said Fred Raiford, the city-parish director of transportation and drainage. "I don't want to be a problem for Iberville, I don't want to be a problem for Ascension and I don't want to be a problem for Livingston."

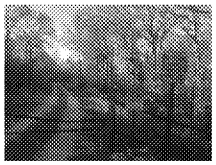
Teri Casso, chairwoman of the Ascension Parish Council, said officials in her parish want to work with East Baton Rouge, too. But, she said, they have concerns about whether the low-lying Bluff Swamp and the Spanish Lake basin, potentially huge, natural flood storage areas, will be recommended as retention options.

If they are, Casso said, a lot of conversations will have to take place about how such a plan would affect her constituents who live in the swamp and possible compensation for their property.

"It would be complicated. My constituents love where they live," she said.

The Corps' 1995 feasibility analysis found that some of the watersheds surrounding the bayous and creeks earmarked for work weren't suitable to major retention efforts, but Raiford said he doesn't know yet what areas might be recommended for regional retention.

Worries about the Corps' Amite River tributary projects in East Baton Rouge are only the latest example of inter-parish conflicts that have flashed after the August 2016 flood, as constituent pressures and billions in federal dollars have reanimated drainage ideas that had sat on the shelf for years.



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Ascension councilman: Time 'to go to court' over Laurel Ridge levee battle with Livingston

Last year, Livingston Parish sued Ascension Parish, the Pontchartrain Levee District and the state Department of Natural Resources over Ascension's long-standing plans to extend the Laurel Ridge Levee along the southeastern edge of Amite River Basin in the St. Amant and Lake areas.

The two parishes reached a truce earlier this year to allow engineering work to continue, but officials disagree whether a proposed mitigation project tied to the levee would do enough to protect lower Livingston from worsened flooding expected from the levee extension.

The Corps is also taking a second look at the Darlington Reservoir, a once-dead idea to build a large storage area along the Amite River in St. Helena and East Feliciana parishes to cut flooding in parishes on the lower river.

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With new Corps of Engineers flood study of Amite, Darlington Reservoir an interest, concern for some

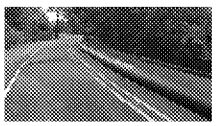
While the idea has support from downstream officials, it also has sparked renewed opposition from upstream landowners who may stand to lose property.

Disputes over drainage have led to other legal challenges, in addition to the one between Ascension and Livingston over the Laurel Ridge Levee.

With Hurricane Barry headed to the coast last month, East Baton Rouge sued Iberville Parish and others over that parish's use of inflatable AquaDams along Manchac Road to block overflow from Bayou Manchac.

City-parish officials contended the dams would worsen flooding in East Baton Rouge while Iberville officials have said the dams were necessary because of the risk of runoff out of

Baton Rouge. Iberville Parish President Mitch Ourso declined to comment Aug. 16, citing that lawsuit in federal court.



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Update: Iberville: AquaDams partially installed along Bayou Manchac before federal order

Dietmar Rietschier, director of the Amite River Basin Commission, said the back and forth reminded him of an old Times-Picayune editorial cartoon about drainage fights in the New Orleans area: Three or four guys were standing in a circle throwing buckets of water on one another.

The thought of that old cartoon still makes him laugh, he said, but, to avoid those kind of disputes, local officials need to find a way to review the science and mitigate any impacts on their neighbors.

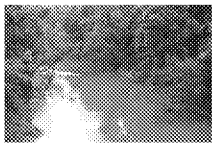
"Look, it goes down to just common sense and (being willing to) sit down at the table," he said.

The Louisiana Watershed Initiative, a post-flood management effort by the state, is expected to create regional councils that would oversee and make recommendations on projects for entire watersheds. However, these future councils, which are still in the development stage and are awaiting federal funding, wouldn't have direct authority over local governments.

Gov. John Bel Edwards announced Friday that the move to create regional authorities did take another step after the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development published long-awaited guidelines for spending $1.2 billion in flood mitigation money. The state now has to submit a plan for spending the money to HUD.

The commission that Rietschier's leads already encompasses the Amite River Basin, but that entity also has no authority over other parishes.

Prodded by members of Congress, the region's parish presidents emerged from a closed-door drainage summit in January 2017 with promises to work cooperatively and to support a handful regional projects, including the Comite River Diversion Canal and the dredging of Bayou Manchac. They have largely continued that rhetoric since then, despite the recent conflicts.



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"We are committed to work with East Baton Rouge on the tributaries project every step of the way," Ascension Parish President Kenny Matassa said Aug. 16.

That's in marked contrast to reactions to the last iteration of the Baton Rouge dredging plans two decades ago. In 1995, the plan was met with strong opposition from downstream residents in Ascension.

Then-Ascension Parish Public Works Director Frank Frederic told Corps officials in a public hearing that he opposed "the clearing of any body of water" in East Baton Rouge that resulted in an increased flow of water to his parish, according to a Corps summary of the meeting.

Amid public concerns then, the Corps did an analysis and found the work would speed up the flow of water downstream, generally increasing peak flow by 5% to 15%.

But the analysis also found that the water would head down stream before chronic backwater flooding took effect on the lower Amite during major events. The Corps concluded then there would be no significant impact.

Ascension Parish Councilman Daniel "Doc" Satterlee, who district includes a Prairieville area that borders Bayou Manchac and the East Baton Rouge line, said the current drainage problems of local residents are due to decisions made by East Baton Rouge, Livingston and Ascension parishes. All have been too willing to allow development to happen without the appropriate infrastructure to support it, he said.

"I think it's rather sad now, frankly, that we have neighbors against neighbors, and the reason for that, in my opinion, is the other parishes surrounding us have done the same thing we did," Satterlee said.

Comparing the 1995 Corps feasibility study with current city-parish data, the number of structures in the watersheds planned for the Corps projects have increased by 1.5 times to 6.5 times since the prior analysis in the mid-'90s.

For instance, the number of structures in the Ward Creek watershed, which empties into Manchac, has increased from 2,471 in the mid-1990s to 18,592 in 2019, city-parish data show. The Jones Creek and Bayou Fountain watersheds have seen similarly large increases, while Blackwater and Beaver bayous have also had increases but less extensive ones.

Increased urbanization generally means the land retains less water than when it was in a more natural state. In an attempt to address that problem, the city-parish has required new developments to mitigate their downstream impacts.

Ascension, and Livingston to a lesser extent, have done the same, though the practice has drawn controversy in Ascension from homeowners. It is being reevaluated with a major ordinance rewrite in a bid to lessen the impact new development has on drainage.

Rene Poche, Corps spokesman, said "changing site conditions" have led the agency to run basin-wide models to confirm its conclusions from the mid-1990s.

Raiford, the East Baton Rouge Parish road and drainage director, said other parishes have been brought in on meetings about the waterway clearing. The analysis by the Corps is expected to provide answers about whether, and how, mitigation should happen, Raiford said.

Cooperation will be necessary for the region's parishes to improve their drainage problems, he noted.

"There's no parish, none of us, are going to be able to solve our problems just by ourselves, not happening, especially ... (with) the intense rainfalls we're getting now, not possible," Raiford observed.

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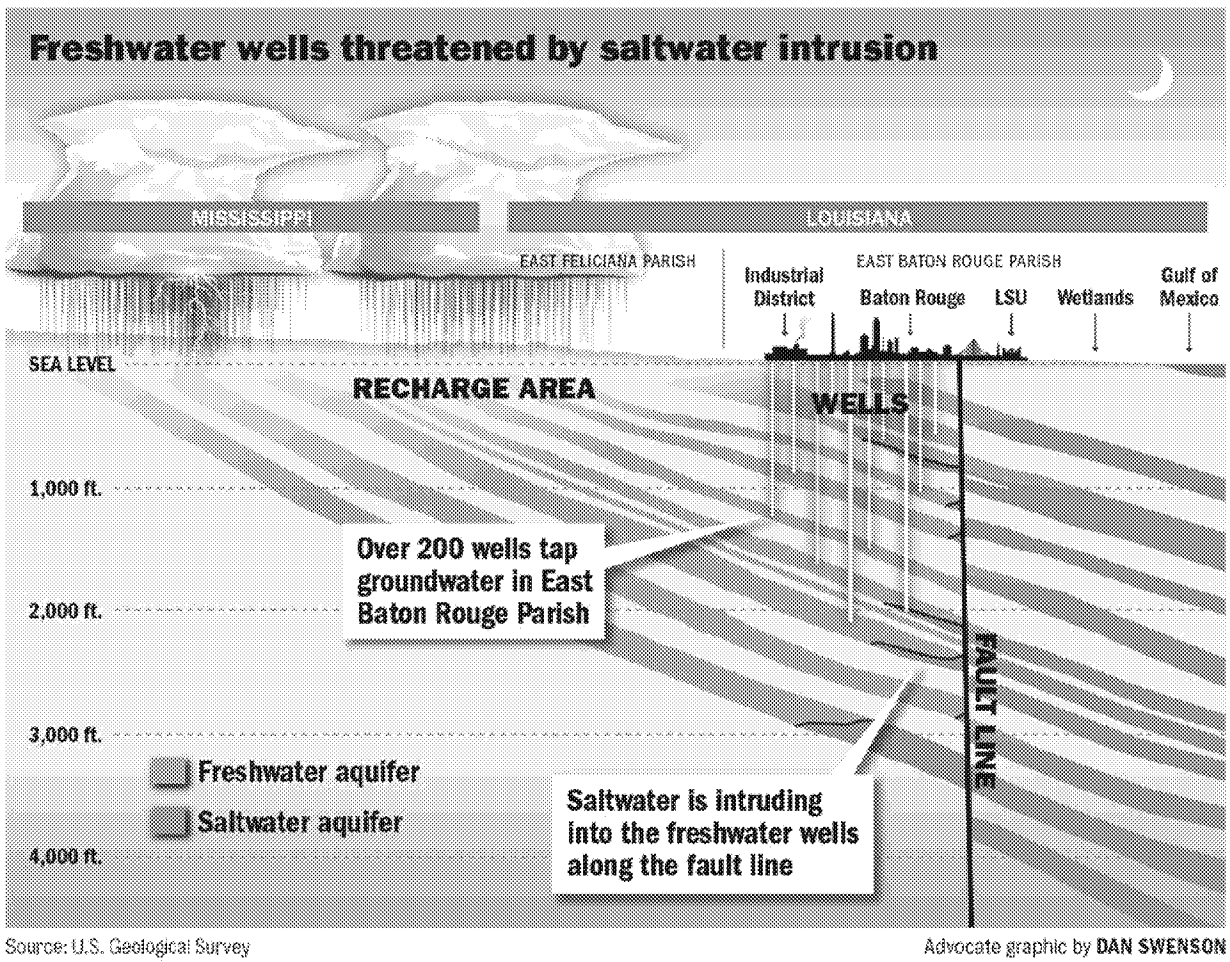
Baton Rouge groundwater commissioners grapple with size of aquifer problems, path for future

BY DAVID J. MITCHELL | STAFF WRITER AUG 24, 2019 - 7:55 PM



Source: U.S. Geological Survey Advocate graphic by **DAN SWENSON**

BY DAN SWENSON | THE ADVOCATE

David Mitchell

Members of a commission struggling to create a 50-year strategic plan for managing the region's aquifer tossed around a lot of ideas at a recent meeting for preserving the vital resource but endorsed no specific measures.

The Capital Area Ground Water Conservation Commission, which manages the multiparish Southern Hills aquifer, has been under pressure from critics to move more aggressively to protect the region's drinking water supply from salt water intrusion coming from the south.

Sitting in a panoramic, glass-walled, third-floor meeting room of the Water Institute that overlooks the rolling Mississippi River in Baton Rouge, commissioners threw out ideas about new water supplies and reducing demand on the huge, groundwater resource that lies underneath Louisiana's capital city. These included:

- Incentives for industries to switch to river water from groundwater.
- Pursuing systems to reuse water, including possibly with treated sewage effluent and regional rainfall storage reservoirs.

- Shifting water production wells, including those for Baton Rouge Water Co., away from zones already being affected by salt water intrusion.

- Harder caps on new and even existing wells to limit groundwater withdrawals.

- Informational campaigns and possibly rate structures to encourage homeowners and businesses to use less water.

None of those ideas nor others bandied about received a particular endorsement this past week.

Some could require passing new legislation or partnerships with businesses, financiers and other agencies, like the utility rate-setting Louisiana Public Service Commission.

Others are likely costly, but all were part of a brainstorming session as a facilitator from the United States Geological Survey encouraged commissioners to come up with ideas to address the group's big-picture objectives for their plan.

The Water Institute is helping the commission develop the new plan, and the commissioners grappled during the last of two meetings

Thursday and Friday with not only what they needed to do but the size of the task facing them.

About 90% of all daily water use in East Baton Rouge Parish came from ground water in 2015, or about 153.1 million gallons per day, according to the USGS' newly published report on Louisiana.

That represents a 2.1% increase in groundwater use over 2010. Though overall water use dropped less than 1% since 2010, reliance on groundwater has increased by 2.5 percentage points as surface water use declined, the USGS found.

Industry, excluding power plants, and homes and businesses drew roughly equal amounts from the aquifer in Baton Rouge in 2015: 72.59 million gallons per day for industry versus 72.21 million gallons per day for homes and businesses, the USGS found.

Commissioner Ken Dawson, who is the chief administrative officer for Ascension Parish government and represents the parish on the commission, said the commission needs a

better idea of the kind of water demand to expect for the future as communities and industries grow.

Commissioner Barry Hugghins said the commission needs to not only determine what the aquifer's limit is but also to inform the public, businesses and industries about what's at stake if that limit is reached.

"The question is, what do we do when we reach that limit? Because if we keep growing, we're going to reach that limit," Hugghins said.

He said the public, industry, the Baton Rouge Water Co. and other governmental entities producing water in outlying areas need to know when that limit is likely to be reached and "what are we going to do when we get there."

Hugghins said it would not be fair to entice billion-dollar projects to the region with one expectation for groundwater use and then a few years later move to greatly restrict that use.

"You can take all the economic development money that we spend and go dump it off that bridge because if we ever have to do that, we're done. We're done," Hugghins said.

Environmentalists have argued that industries, in particular ExxonMobil's huge refinery and chemical complex in northern Baton Rouge, should switch to river water to save the aquifer for humans. Industry backers say that facility, which is nearly 110 years old, and other plants have been geared to take advantage of the aquifer's purity and that kind of switch can't be done easily.

In the commission's fundamental objectives for the new strategic plan, the body has somewhat split the difference.

The objectives first recognize the need for "healthy, high-quality drinking water" to all residents on an equal basis but also states the need to provide clean, inexpensive water for business and industries "indefinitely."

Yet, the objectives also call for the commission to achieve sustainable and resilient groundwater withdrawals from the aquifer and reduce salt water intrusion.

Last month, the Water Institute provided the commissioners an estimate that the aquifer in the Baton Rouge area was already operating at deficit between pumping and natural recharge. However, some commissioners have questioned the validity of that estimate, especially in light of recent plant shutdowns that have cut groundwater use.

Bills to provide tax incentives to plants to switch to river water and for consumers to buy high-efficiency appliances failed to gain traction in the Legislature earlier this year.

But an ExxonMobil representative told the commission Friday the company is interested in pursuing public-private partnerships and other opportunities.

The commission meets again Sept. 12-13 and is expected to settle on a series of measures and then ask the Water Institute and other researchers to see how well they fulfill the plan's big-picture objectives.

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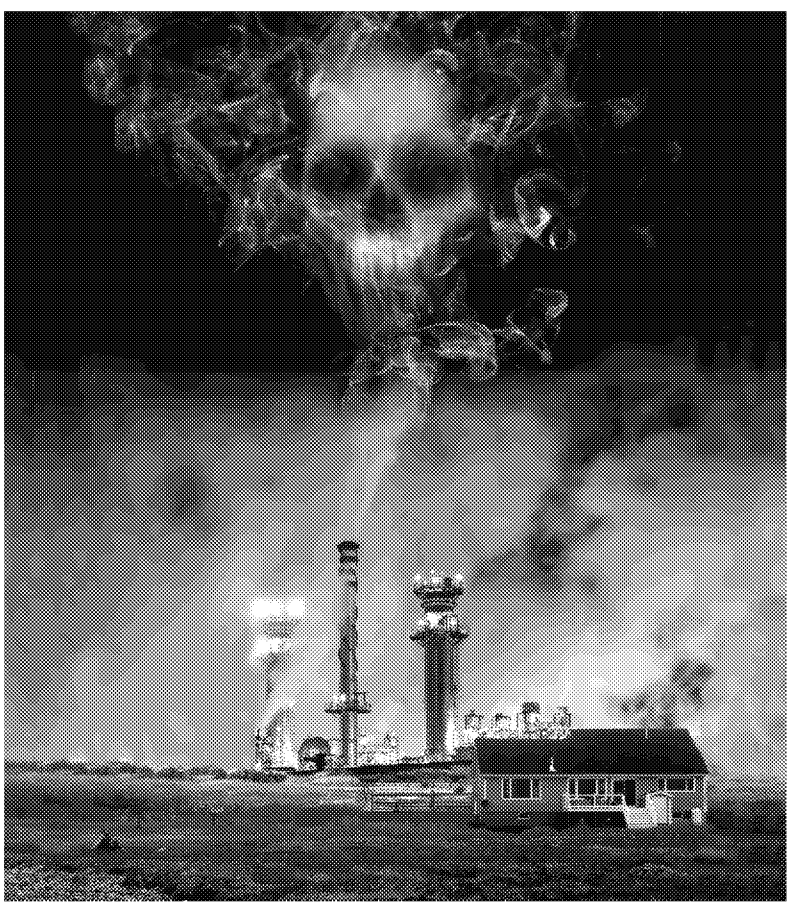
ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES FEATURE SEPTEMBER 9-16, 2019, ISSUE

Have Petrochemicals Doomed This Louisiana Community?

Residents of St. James are fighting new plastics plants—but some wonder if they should leave before pollution kills them.

By Mara Kardas-Nelson

TODAY 7:00 AM



The sunsets from Sharon Lavigne's home in St. James, Louisiana, are

otherworldly. in the evenings, the 67-year-old can look out from her porch onto the 20 acres she inherited from her grandfather, the land bathed in orange and pink light. Once farmland, today it is mostly grass, which gives off a sweet, earthy smell as the heat leaves with the day.

Interrupting the quiet murmur of cicadas is the steady clank and hum of machinery. Tall metal tanks are visible from Lavigne's property, with twisted pipes running between them and plumes of white smoke curling above.

St. James sits smack in the middle of Cancer Alley, a series of communities, mostly majority African American, that line the banks of the Mississippi River from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. For decades, oil, gas, chemicals, and plastics have been produced here, and for an equally long time, residents have said they've faced significant health issues because of the plants. St. James Parish (the equivalent of a county) has a population of 21,000 and 32 petrochemical plants—one for every 656 residents. Industry is even more concentrated in the parish's Fifth District, where Lavigne lives, which is 86 percent black. (The parish overall is 50 percent black.) The community has 2,822 people and 12 petrochemical plants—one for every 235 residents.

Last fall, Lavigne heard that two new companies were looking to build major industrial facilities in St. James. Formosa Petrochemical, a Taiwanese company, plans to build a $9.4 billion plant in the Fifth District to produce polypropylene and other compounds used in plastic products like bottles and grocery bags. According to Formosa's application for an air permit, the facility will become one of the state's largest emitters of ethylene oxide and benzene, both of which are known carcinogens. In the Fourth District, directly across the river from Lavigne's home, a Chinese company, Wanhua Chemical Group, plans to build a $1.85 billion plant to produce a different compound widely used in plastics.

Lavigne is a devout Catholic, and one evening after she heard the news, she went to her porch to pray. She already felt hemmed in by industry; the addition of other facilities struck her as an existential threat to the vitality of the town her family helped make, a town that people and businesses have been leaving slowly but consistently for decades as the petrochemical companies moved in.

"I said, 'Dear God, do you want me to give up my land, my home?'" she recalls. Then a red bird flew into her yard, and she knew she had an answer. "He said, 'No.' I said, 'What do you want me to do?' He said, 'Fight.'"

Taking inspiration from her late father, who was a local NAACP leader, Lavigne founded a group she called Rise St. James, with the goal of blocking the two new plants. The group faces a tough political landscape. St. James's seven-

member Parish Council green-lit Formosa's plan a few months after Rise was created, and now the company is applying for an air permit from the state. Hundreds of public comments have been submitted in opposition. The same trajectory was expected for Wanhua until Rise pushed back. The company's application, initially approved by the Parish Council, has now been kicked back to a planning commission, putting a kink in Wanhua's plans.

Lavigne has support from environmental groups in New Orleans and across the country, which have helped with everything from filing lawsuits against the parish to taking her to Washington, DC, for public presentations and meetings with members of Congress. But she doesn't have as much support as she'd like from her fellow St. James residents. On paper, there are about two dozen Rise members, but some who say they'll go to meetings don't show up. "Even after all these months of fighting, some people still tell me it's a done deal," she says.

While Lavigne is deeply committed to the land her family has lived on for generations, some of her neighbors have said they feel fed up and hopeless—and they're seeking buyouts that could help them move to a less polluted area. Beneath her struggle to organize is a question that often goes unspoken: When a place is as polluted as St. James is, should its residents stay and fight—or make plans to leave?

The fighter: Lavigne founded Rise St. James after she heard that two new petrochemical plants were planned near her home. *(Mara Kardas-Nelson)*

Over the years, Lavigne has seen her neighbors do one of three things: get sick, die, or move away. When she was growing up, St. James had several grocery stores, a family doctor who made house calls, a few restaurants, and multiple post offices. Many of the businesses were black-owned. Many families farmed—mostly sugarcane, sometimes rice, cultivating land that was worked decades before by enslaved people.

Driving along Highway 18, which runs in a thin line beside the Mississippi, Lavigne points out house after house that is no longer occupied. There's Burton Lane, which mainly has elderly residents and a few families, since most of the younger people have left. Freetown, a neighborhood founded by a community of former slaves in 1842, is being reduced to a single road by a steady invasion of oil tanks.

As the people left, so did the businesses. Today, the most prominent family operation is a little shack that sells sno-balls (Louisiana's version of the snow cone) on the side of

the highway. The closest grocery store is a Walmart in Donaldsonville, about 12 miles away.

Clyde Cooper, who represents the Fifth District and is one of three black members on the Parish Council, says there have been a few attempts to open stores in St. James, but the question is always "Are there enough people to support the business?" He continues, "Industry isn't uplifting the community. It's really tearing the community down. People are moving out of the parish, and those who still stay are hurting."

The Fourth and Fifth districts provide the majority of the parish's property tax revenue but haven't reaped the rewards of the industrial facilities they host. In the 2019 budget, for example, the Fifth District has $105,100 allocated for its recreation budget, plus $10,400 for construction. The First District, meanwhile, has $600,000 allocated for improvement of its ball fields. And the Fifth District will provide even more tax revenue in the coming years, thanks to a 2014 land-use plan approved after limited public input. The plan designates the district as a "residential/future industrial" area, while keeping other, whiter parts of St. James designated strictly for residential growth.

The district has been left with a dwindling number of schools, a limited evacuation route, and only one park, which consists primarily of a parking lot, some covered picnic tables, and a small playground surrounded by views of petrochemical plants. It has no health center, which is a problem because residents say they are dealing with significant health issues because of all the industry in area.

On our drive along Highway 18, Lavigne points out the houses of those who have been diagnosed with or have died from cancer. "That family—the mother and daughter both have cancer," she says, shaking her head. "That one, the wife died of cancer." Lavigne's brother, who lives down the road from her, is also a cancer survivor.

Hollowed out: As pollution forces residents out, activists are asking for an end to new petrochemical plants along Cancer Alley. *(Alicia Cooke)*

The extent to which industry is responsible for these illnesses is a matter of fierce debate. Dozens of chemicals released from the area's petrochemical facilities are known carcinogens, and in two census tracts in St. James, the cancer risk from air pollution exceeds what the Environmental Protection Agency says is the "upper limit of acceptability." But the Louisiana Tumor Registry, a state body, has said there's no evidence of an elevated cancer risk along the New Orleans–Baton Rouge corridor, calling Cancer Alley a misnomer.

Wilma Subra, a chemist and technical adviser for the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN) who received a MacArthur "genius" grant in 1999, has been working with the state's industrial communities for decades; she notes that, until recently, the Tumor Registry reported data only on a parish level. That meant no distinction could be seen across towns in the same parish even if they had different exposure to emissions—which could water down the results concerning possibly elevated cancer rates. She and others advocated for that practice to change, and now the registry reports rates for each census tract.

But Subra says it's still difficult to demonstrate increased cancer rates because most people who have insurance go outside Louisiana to receive state-of-the-art cancer care—adults to Houston, kids to Tennessee. As a result, their cancers are reported out of state, even if they're residents of Louisiana.

There are other problems. In St. James, the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality monitors ozone but not volatile organic compounds, the primary toxic substances released by industrial facilities. The DEQ could require companies to do fence-line monitoring to measure pollution at their sites. Despite repeated requests by residents and other environmental groups, the DEQ has required this to be done at only one plant, in a parish down the river from St. James. Data collected there shows that residents have been exposed to emissions that can reach 765 times the levels considered safe by the EPA.

While proof of causality may be hard to come by, the perception that poor health is linked to the petrochemical industry is enough to shake residents. It's a primary topic of conversation for Lavigne and her family and neighbors: This person had a stroke, that person has respiratory problems, someone else's neighbor now has throat cancer. The threat of ill health has pushed some of Lavigne's children and grandchildren out of the parish. "People with young kids don't want to live here anymore," she says. "They're worried they'll get sick." The two grandchildren who have stayed often have trouble breathing St. James's air.

On Sundays, Lavigne tucks a stack of yellow Rise St. James flyers into her gold choir robe. She hands them out before services at the 200-year-old St. James Catholic Church, where she's worshipped since she was a child, sharing information about Wanhua and Formosa and encouraging neighbors to lobby the Parish Council in opposition to the companies' plans.

After a service in March, she takes the flyers to a backyard barbecue, where a man is frying chicken in a metal vat. Oil tanks sit behind him, just beyond the house's fence. The chef, Kirk Carey, has worked in the petrochemical industry for years, at a plant outside the parish. His wife works at a plant, too. Industry jobs can easily pay six figures, especially those that are more technical, like engineering positions. But "no one gets jobs in the parish," Carey says. "Everybody's got to go outside to get work."

Nearly a dozen residents across St. James echo the complaint about jobs, insisting that most of them, especially the well-paid ones, go to outsiders—"because this parish is a

club," says Carey's friend Gregory Clayton. Rubbing a finger along his arm, he continues, "You get in by the color of your skin. It's been like that for a long time." (Employee information is protected by law, and in Louisiana, a right-to-work state, there are few unions that could verify the racial composition of the workforce.)

Louisiana is the second largest petrochemical producer in the country, after Texas, thanks in part to its natural resources and proximity to the Gulf of Mexico—and also to its friendly corporate climate. Since the 1930s, Louisiana has allowed industry to skirt local taxes through the Industrial Tax Exemption Program. While the state's Democratic governor, John Bel Edwards, has reformed the program so that local governments can now impose some property taxes on petrochemical facilities if they wish, the Formosa and Wanhua plants were proposed before that change was made, so tax exemptions will be grandfathered in. "St. James Parish currently has almost exactly as much industrial property exempted as the entire state of Texas—$2.1 billion," says Broderick Bagert, an organizer with Together Louisiana, a statewide network of religious and civic organizations. "After the Formosa and Wanhua deals, St. James will be giving away at least six times more in property tax subsidies than all of Texas."

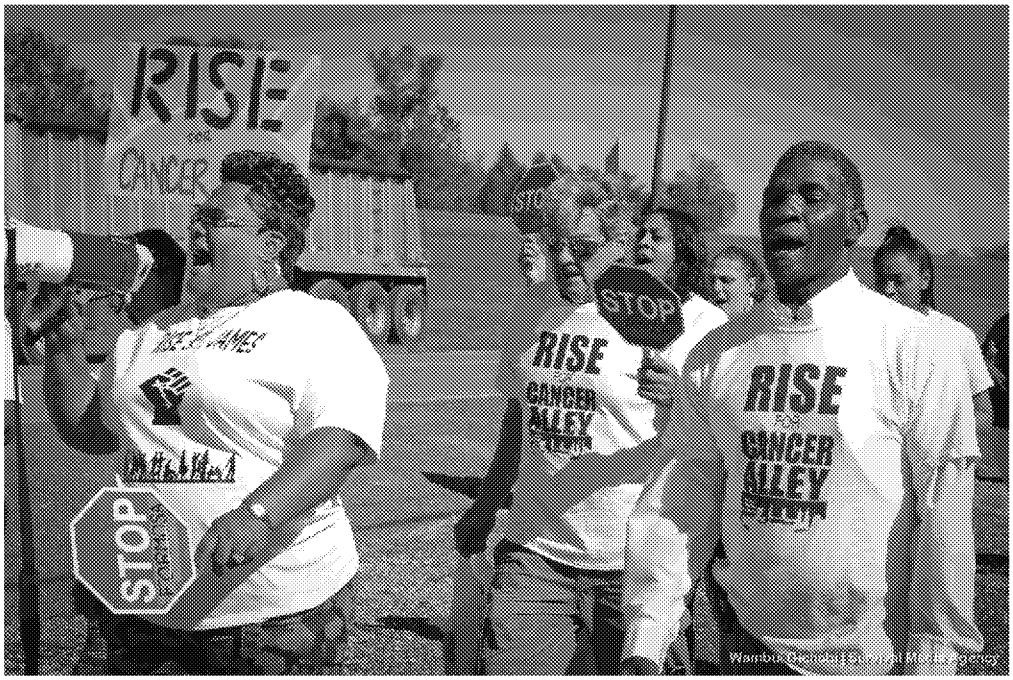
Nor are the plants likely to receive significant regulatory oversight from the DEQ, which is responsible for enforcing state rules as well as the regulations written by the EPA. Andrew Jacoby, an environmental lawyer based in New Orleans, says that the DEQ lacks adequate funding from the state, barely flexes its regulatory muscle, and has an ingrained pro-industry mentality. "We have regulatory

capture that's almost absolute," he says. "Every level of government is pro-industry—which isn't necessarily bad, but it is a problem if communities' interests are compromised. And government's actions suggest a total lack of interest in the health of these communities."

Several St. James residents, including Lavigne, say they've called the DEQ to register complaints about industrial emissions multiple times, only to see a department representative several days later or not at all. A 2011 EPA study noted that "Louisiana has the lowest enforcement activity levels" in its region, which includes Arkansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Among other things, the study cited "a culture in which the state agency is expected to protect industry."

Local government could put up significant restrictions on new industry or at least require stronger environmental protections. But several of St. James's Parish Council members, including the president, are current or former employees of the petrochemical industry. "As the government, our first priority should be the safety and protection of our citizens," says the Fifth District's Cooper. "But I don't think that's first and foremost the interest of this council. There's just this mind-set of more, more, more."

Under an awning at the barbecue, Lavigne chats with a woman while continuing to hand out flyers. "Come out tomorrow night. There's a council meeting," Lavigne says. The woman responds that she's heard about the new plants, it's awful, and she'd like to attend—but she has other plans.



Rising up: Activists with Rise St. James have staged protests, spoken at public meetings, and filed lawsuits against local and state governments. *(Survival Media Agency / Wambui Gichobi)*

A few days later, I meet Eve Butler in a Baptist church in the Fifth District. She is waiting for me inside, taking shelter from a midday rain. She tries to avoid such showers, she explains, because "in 2016, I was caught in the rain, and my face peeled pink from the chemicals. It was like a really bad sunburn." She has been especially sensitive about health issues since being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2017. She's in remission now, but the treatment made her too sick to work.

Like Lavigne's, Butler's family has lived in St. James for several generations. She moved back to the area in 2008 after serving in the military and working in towns across the country and now lives with her mother and sister on Freetown Lane, surrounded by industrial facilities.

Several years ago, Butler joined Humanitarian Enterprise of Loving People (HELP), a group whose original aim was to restart local businesses. (Lavigne is also a member.) The

focus quickly changed to environmental concerns. "Children are having asthma, kids are having cancer, young women are having miscarriages," Butler summarizes. "House foundations are shifting with all the construction."

While Lavigne is fighting to stay in the parish, Butler is now trying to leave it. She decided it was time to go after the council announced its new land-use plan, which designates part of the Fifth District as industrial. "My mother's family were slaves, and my family has been in Freetown for at least 100 years," she says. "That's a long time for us to live here and give it up. But I don't think it's going to improve. There's just too much industry, too many chemicals. Formosa will be 1.25 miles from the elementary school. Then there's South Louisiana Methanol, NuStar, LOCAP, Plains, and YCI," she continues, ticking off the neighboring facilities. "There's no buffer zone between us and the plants. *We* are the buffer zone."

Butler has worked with LEAN and with other residents advocating for a community-wide buyout. That would, at least in theory, allow neighbors to move with neighbors, family members with family members, keeping together some of the bonds that have formed over a century.

In a statement submitted to the St. James Planning Commission in February, LEAN notes that some residents, including Butler, "have repeatedly requested the opportunity to relocate due to the development that has surrounded their community that they believe impacts their health and safety on a daily basis.... The Parish must [provide] relief through voluntary relocation and/or other considerations as dictated by those impacted populations."

Michael Orr, the communications director for LEAN, points out that even before the Wanhua and Formosa plants were proposed, "some residents felt as though their community was so degraded that they wanted to leave, to be bought out."

In the absence of a coordinated strategy, residents eager to leave have unwittingly engaged in a race to the bottom. As more industry has moved in and more residents have left, property values have tanked. Across the parish, the median value of a home is $136,400, $26,000 less than the median value across the state and $81,200 less than the median value nationally. Orr estimates that the houses in Freetown and Burton Lane, which are closest to the industrial plants, are worth much less than the parish average. "Even if you paid two or three times what they're worth, [the homeowners] still can't get enough money to buy a house anywhere else." (LEAN advocates for the homes to be bought at or above the state median.)

Residents in some of Louisiana's most polluted towns have obtained buyouts. In 2011, people in Mossville were offered a voluntary relocation package from the petrochemical company SASOL, which was expanding a chemical plant. Many in the environmental movement have criticized the buyout, which was taken by nearly every community member, suggesting that those who didn't want to go faced peer pressure and that residents didn't receive adequate compensation. Orr counters that residents received 160 percent of their home's value, plus moving expenses.

The criticism hasn't been only about money. Stacey Ryan, one of the few Mossville residents who has stayed, explained his decision in a 2015 interview with the Sierra Club as a commitment to the history of a community founded by enslaved people. "I have not been offered a fair price for my property, and I refuse to give it away," he said. "I am not someone who seeks the limelight, but I'm aware of my heritage and the ways in which industry can erase history." Buyouts in other parts of the country, particularly by the fracking industry, have been criticized for being, in essence, a relatively cheap and easy way to keep communities quiet.

Orr makes it clear that LEAN supports whatever the community members decide, whether it's fighting new plants or obtaining a buyout. But he wonders to what extent the renewed effort to stay is being influenced by outside groups—including the Sierra Club, 350 New Orleans, and several religious organizations—that see St. James as part of a larger struggle against petrochemical development. In June many of these groups marched alongside Rise St. James to Baton Rouge in order to demand, among other things, that no new petrochemical plants be approved in Mississippi River parishes.

Regardless, the fact that the residents of St. James now face a devastating choice is not the fault of environmentalists: It's the result of decades of industrial pollution and a lack of support from government. Scott Eustis, the community science director for Healthy Gulf, a New Orleans–based organization focused on Louisiana's wetlands, describes the fight against the new plants in St. James as "a climate issue, a racism issue, a Mississippi River pollution issue, a waste

issue. If people care about the Green New Deal, about green jobs, about environmental issues, then they should care about Sharon [Lavigne]." He isn't against buyouts, but he argues that instilling hope through more organizing could rally people to stay in the parish. "I think if we had more resources, more support, we could get people talking about these things together and push back together."

It's difficult to tell what community members really want. Butler notes that many people say they want to leave in private but then clam up in public, reluctant to offer what could be seen as criticism of an industry that promises jobs. Lavigne points out that people can change their tune depending on who they're talking to. But she says that since Rise St. James started, more people have told her they want to stay and victories like the one that saw the Wanhua application kicked back to the planning commission show their efforts may be paying off. "Even people in industry, they come up to me and say, 'What you're doing is right, because the plants are killing us.'" Lavigne says residents have been advised to stay by others who left and are struggling to make it in new, more expensive places. "They say it's just not worth it."

For a long time, Lavigne's brother, Milton Cayette, was among the residents who felt torn. Retired after more than 30 years at Shell Oil, he goes to as many Parish Council meetings as possible, where he and Lavigne wear matching "Rise St. James" T-shirts.

"I'm against Formosa. I'm against all the plants coming in. We hope and pray that that won't happen," Cayette says. But his children, who have left St. James, are worried about his

health. He says that even if the Formosa and Wanhua facilities are not approved, there will be other plants—and he's decided it's time to leave. "I see the writing on the wall. I think this is a losing battle. It's just going to get worse. I'd sell in a heartbeat."

Lavigne understands the impulse. "Everyone wishes me good luck, because they say they would be so happy if they could stay. But if the plants go through, they're ready to go," she says. She hasn't yet thought about what she'll do if Formosa and Wanhua are approved. If she moves, she'll be cut off from the church that she and Cayette have attended since they were children—a prospect that she finds devastating. "There's no way I'm leaving that church," she says. "That is my home."

Mara Kardas-Nelson Mara Kardas-Nelson is a freelance journalist based in Berkeley, California.

COMMENTS (0)

First Look: Why The 2020 Election Will Surprise You

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Buzzworthy

The Guardian

School at centre of Guardian's Cancer Town series may move students due to air pollution

Emissions of a likely carcinogen emitted by a nearby plant have been recorded at levels hundreds of times above the safe limit

Oliver Laughland

Sat 24 Aug 2019 02.00 EDT

Local officials in Reserve, Louisiana, are examining the prospect of removing pupils from an elementary school situated a few hundred feet from a chemical plant that presents the highest risk of cancer due to airborne toxins anywhere in America, the Guardian has learned.

The Fifth Ward elementary school, which educates close to 500 students aged up to 10 years old, has become a focal point in environmental activism in Reserve after emissions of a likely carcinogen, chloroprene, emitted by the nearby plant have been recorded at the school at levels hundreds of times above the safe limit recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

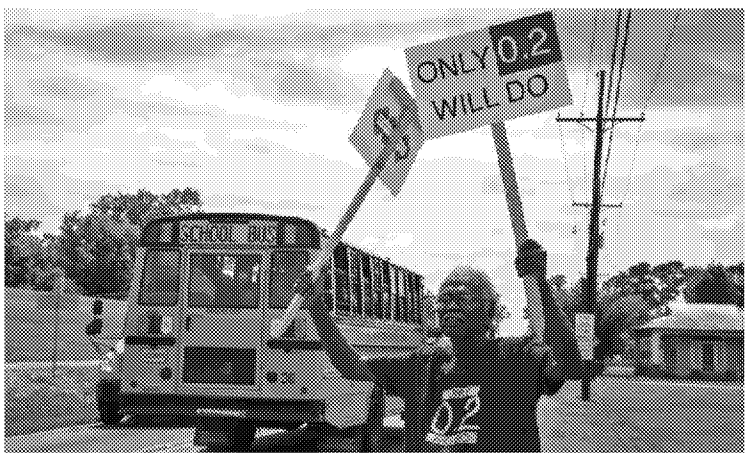
Reserve is the focus of a year-long reporting series by the Guardian, Cancer Town, which is examining local residents' fight for clean air in a locality the EPA says has a cancer risk that is 50

times above the national average. The plant, the Pontchartrain Works facility, has been operated by the Japanese company Denka since 2015 and was run by the chemicals giant DuPont for just under five decades. It is the only place in America to produce the synthetic rubber neoprene.

In a statement the St John the Baptist school board confirmed its executive committee had voted to "conduct a study to look into the feasibility of moving students from Fifth Ward elementary". The study will examine the "financial impact of such a move and to determine how to address the matter with the courts because the district is still under and must comply with a desegregation order".

The move marks a turn in local authorities' attitude to air pollution issues in the municipality. In November last year the school board was sued by a local parent who demanded they relocate students at Fifth Ward after residents and activists claimed they were being ignored by local officials. The lawsuit was later dismissed after agreement on both sides.

"We want to make the right decision. That's why we're taking the proactive step of looking into the feasibility study ... to see where it would take us, and what impact it would have on the school tself to move the students around to another site in the district," said Patrick Sander, the St John the Baptist parish school board president. Sanders did not offer a timeframe of when the review would be completed.



Members of the Concerned Citizens of St John protest near a school in Reserve, Louisiana. Photograph: Julie Dermansky

Sanders, who has lived in Reserve all his life, said he had begun to consider the air quality issues in the area more closely after the death of his own sister from a rare neurological disease, neurosarcoidosis.

"I grew up in that district. I'm still a resident of that district. I'm less than 500ft away from the plant site itself. I truly have some personal concerns about the air quality and the effect that it has on the local residents, myself included," he said.

But he warned that other members of the 11-person board were more skeptical of a move to disperse the students.

"There are concerns from other board members that these are the same children that are going back into the community [near the plant]. Even if we disperse them to other schools for a period of eight hours, they're coming back home to the same community and breathing the same air," he said.

Sanders has previously written to Denka in March 2019 to ask them to comply with a safe standard of chloroprene emissions suggested by the EPA. The EPA recommends a safe lifetime exposure limit of 0.2 micrograms per cubic meter of chloroprene, but readings at Fifth Ward have sometimes been hundreds of times above that. In November 2017 a reading was taken at the school that was 755 times above the EPA guidance.

Denka, which has entered into a voluntary agreement with the state of Louisiana to reduce emissions by 85%, did not respond to a request for comment. Denka and DuPont are facing potential legal action from Louisiana's environment agency, LDEQ, over alleged violations of the Clean Air Act.

Topics

- Louisiana
- Cancer Town
- Air pollution
- Pollution
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StormTeam Alert

Heat Advisory from 1PM CDT MON until 7PM CDT MON

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AP

Feds settle with supermarket group over clean air violations

Aug 23, 2019 Updated Aug 23, 2019

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (AP) — A supermarket company has agreed to reduce emissions of ozone-depleting gases from refrigeration equipment at more than 500 stores in seven southeastern states, federal authorities said Friday.

The Department of Justice and the Environmental Protection Agency reached the agreement with Southeastern Grocers Inc. and its subsidiaries to resolve violations of the Clean Air Act, according to a DOJ news release.

The company, headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida, owns and operates BI-LO, Fresco y Más, Harveys Supermarket and Winn-Dixie grocery stores.

The supermarket company failed to promptly repair leaks of refrigerator coolants, failed to keep adequate service records and failed to provide information about its compliance record, the release says.

The company will spend about $4.2 million over the next three years to reduce coolant leaks and to improve compliance at 576 stores. It will also pay a $300,000 civil penalty.

The settlement will help assure the company's "future compliance with the Clean Air Act's ozone-depletion program — by requiring leak monitoring, centralized computer recordkeeping, and searchable electronic reporting to EPA," Assistant Attorney General Jeffrey Bossert Clark of DOJ's Environment and Natural Resources Division said in the release.

"These steps will not only help to prevent damage to the environment, but should also help save energy," EPA Assistant Administrator for Enforcement and Compliance Assurance Susan Bodine said in the release.

The company did not immediately respond to phone and email messages seeking comment Friday.

The agreement says the company will maintain an annual, company-wide average leak rate of 17% through 2022. The release says the grocery store sector average leak rate is 25%.

Under the Clean Air Act, owners and operators of commercial refrigeration equipment with more than 50 pounds (22.6 kilograms) of ozone-depleting refrigerants must repair leaks within 30 days.

The company's website says its stores are found in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina and South Carolina.

DOJ says the settlement is the fourth in a string of grocery refrigerant cases. Previous settlements were reached with Safeway Inc., Costco Wholesale Corp., and Trader Joe's Co.

U.S. needs to develop a national recycling strategy

By Jerry Pacheco / Business Across the Border

Monday, August 26th, 2019 at 12:02am

Bales of recycled plastic await shipping at the Friedman Recycling Plant in Albuquerque in March. (Jim Thompson/Albuquerque Journal)

Business across the border

Jerry Pacheco
jerry@nmiba.com

On June 29, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed an amendment sponsored by Rep. Haley Stevens of Michigan that was part of a larger bill. The amendment directs the Environmental Protection Agency to use its funding to create a national recycling strategy that will ensure the long-term economic and environmental viability of recycling programs at the local level.

On the heels of the amendment, Rep. Deb Haaland of New Mexico joined other representatives in writing a letter to EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler, asking if his agency can develop a strategy to assist communities across the nation that are facing stockpiles of recycled items. This is occurring because China, which had previously taken U.S. recyclables, has reduced its imports of these items to a trickle, thus putting many communities with fledgling recycling programs in a crisis mode, as the cost of their recycling programs rise. Haaland and her colleagues want to see the federal government invest in infrastructure that will allow these communities to continue with their recycling efforts. The letter expresses a desire for the U.S. to become the world leader in recycling and to stop throwing away billions of dollars of recyclable materials each year.

A comparison of other leading recycling countries shows just how far the U.S. needs to go to catch up. Last year, Eunomia, which tracks recycling among countries of the world, published the report, "Recycling — Who Really Leads the World?" According to this report, Germany, which recycles 56 percent of its waste, is the world's leading recycler, followed by Austria (54 percent), South Korea (54 percent), Wales (52 percent), and Switzerland (50 percent). Of the top 10 recyclers on the list, eight are in Europe and two are in Asia (South Korea and Singapore). At a 35 percent recycling rate, the United States barely cracks the top 25 list.

A look at Germany's recycling program reveals just how seriously the country's national recycling strategy deals with waste. The country produces more than 30 million tons of garbage annually therefore, it recycles 16,800,000 tons of waste. As part of its recycling strategy, Germany established the Green Dot system, which is intended to result in less and lighter packaging. Retailers and manufacturers have to pay for a Green Dot on products, and the more packaging they use, the more they have to pay. This creates an incentive to use less plastic, paper, metal, and other packaging materials when shipping and selling a product. This alone has resulted in more than one million tons less garbage on an annual basis.

Another part of Germany's recycling program is the requirements at the local level. First, households have multi-colored bins in which to deposit recyclables. Glass and bottles that are non-refundable and without a deposit are put in a separate glass bin. Paper and paper products are dumped into blue bins. Aluminum, cans, and beverage cartons go into yellow bins.

Bio-waste (leaves, coffee filters, and food waste) are dumped into brown bins. This waste is used for composting or to make fuel from biomass. Most other odd items such as nylons, tissues, diapers, cigarette butts, pots/pans, and brushes will be dumped in a gray bin. Hazmat items such as chemicals, batteries, fluorescent tubes, and cans of paint will be sent to collection sites for separate disposal. Damaged or old furniture and household items also can be taken to collection sites or left in front of the house for commercial recyclers or restorers to pick up.

Germany's aggressive recycling strategy has raised the bar in the world. One might think that such a strategy takes an inordinate time to develop. However, within 20 years, the tiny country of Wales in the United Kingdom increased its recycling rate by more than 50 percent to move to number four on the list of top recyclers. It did so by creating a strong recycling strategy, with aggressive targets, in which everybody from the top down participated. To date, approximately 85 percent of localities have met their recycling targets. Furthermore, similar to what House members are calling for in the U.S., the Welsh officials backed up their vision with funding to local authorities so that they could achieve the aggressive targets.

Some might argue that Americans' materialistic culture has a disposable aspect in which we freely toss away waste that could be easily recycled. Others might argue that making recycling available to the extent that Germany and the other top recyclers do will add increased costs to products. However, on the flipside of the coin, the cost of not recycling includes increased pollution, expanding landfills, increased health risks, and poor stewardship of our planet. A bold national recycling strategy could be the new Apollo space program moonshot that can integrate our communities and help draw our nation closer together.

Jerry Pacheco is the executive director of the International Business Accelerator, a nonprofit trade counseling program of the New Mexico Small Business Development Centers Network. He can be reached at 575-589-2200 or at jerry@nmiba.com.

NMED, Picuris seek tips on dumping of sewage in Rio Pueblo

By Theresa Davis / Journal Staff Writer

Friday, August 23rd, 2019 at 3:25pm

SANTA FE, N.M. — The New Mexico Environment Department and Picuris Pueblo are seeking information on illegal dumping of raw sewage into the Rio Pueblo.

Picuris Pueblo recently found evidence of raw sewage in the Rio Pueblo. (Image source: NM Environment Department)

Picuris Pueblo found evidence of toilet paper and other solids in the river last week, and contacted NMED to report the contamination.

Pueblo staff and NMED's Surface Water Quality Bureau tested the river water at the pueblo and downstream. The test results show levels of E. coli bacteria in the river are at normal levels.

The Picuris Pueblo restricted access to the river upon finding the contamination, but NMED said in a release that the "Rio Pueblo is now open and safe for recreation." Picuris Pueblo is offering a $500 reward to anyone who identifies the illegal dumper.

Residents with information on illegal dumping or other suspicious environmental activities can contact the NMED environmental incident hotline at 1-800-219-6157 or report the incident online at env.nm.gov.

Contact the writer.

14 hrs ago

BOWMANVILLE, Ontario (AP) – Brett Moffitt led 45 of 64 laps of Sunday's Chevrolet Silverado 250 at Canadian Tire Motorsport Park on his way to a second straight win in the NASCAR Truck Series playoffs. Moffitt won last weekend at Bristol Motor Speedway and the back-to-back victories give him four for the season

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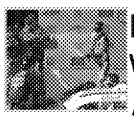

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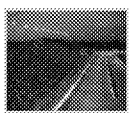


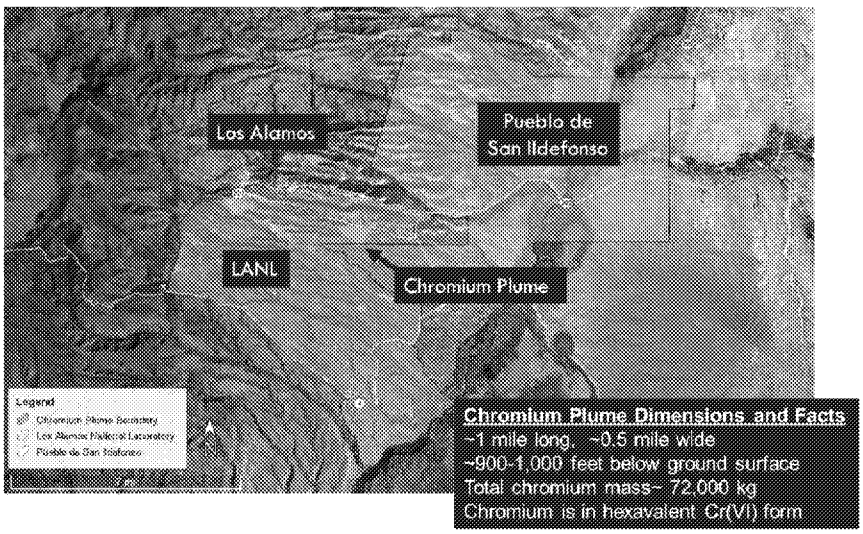
Newgarden wins IndyCar pole at Gateway, his third of season

Aug. 23, 2019 08:28 PM EDT

DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY 6 hours ago

A long road to remediation for hexavalent chromium plume near Los Alamos

By **Kendra Chamberlain**



NMED

A map showing the estimated boundaries of the hexavalent chromium plume outside Los Alamos.

In the years between 1956 and 1972, thousands of kilograms of chemical called hexavalent chromium was released into a canyon near Los Alamos. Some of the contaminant filtered through the soils of the area and was consequently converted to trivalent chromium, a far less dangerous iteration of the chemical. But at least 2,000 kg of hexavalent chromium has remained in the environment, moving through the canyonlands that surround Los Alamos for decades. Today, the contamination is settled atop an aquifer in a plume, and the chemical is now present within the first 100 feet of the water table in the area of the plume.

The Department of Energy (DOE) and the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) have been working to contain the plume since 2005, while officials decide on how best to clean up the contamination.

Chromium is the main additive to stainless steel, and gives the metal its anti-corrosive properties. Hexavalent chromium was used in power plant operations across the United States to prevent rust in decades past. Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) used the chemical to coat the inside of pipes at a power plant operation in what's known as Technical Area 3 (https://www.lanl.gov/conferences/tritium-focus-group/_assets/docs/ta3_conf_rooms.pdf), where it was dumped into the surrounding environment as part of a water discharge operation.

Dumping the chemical was "a normal practice throughout the country" at the time, according to Doug Hintze, manager of the DOE's Environmental Management Los Alamos field office.

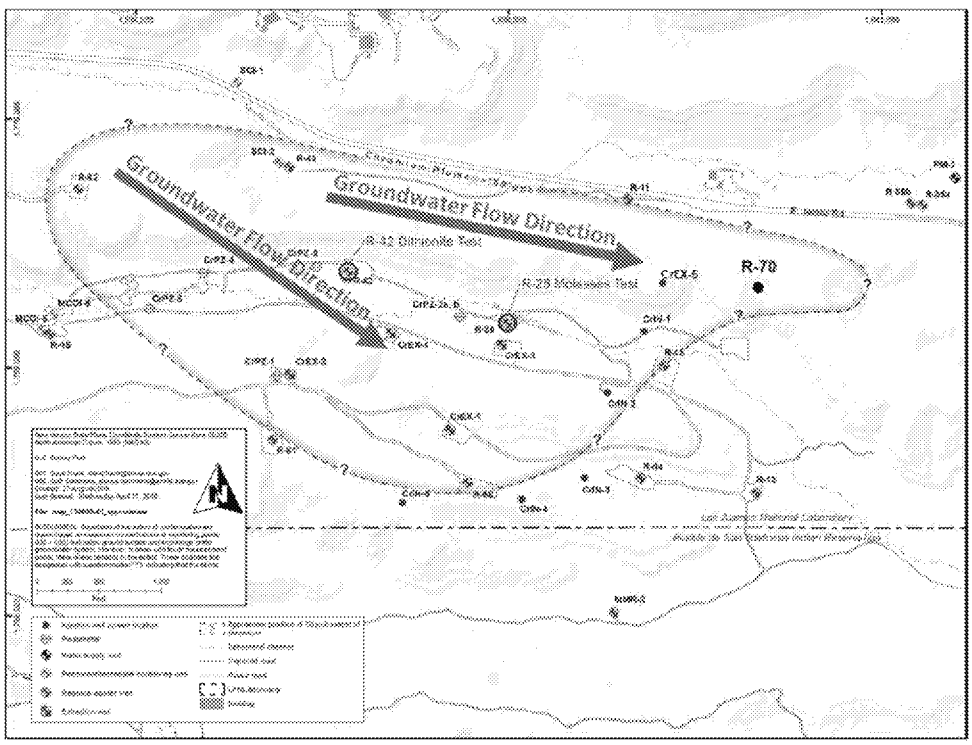
"You just released it into the environment," he said. "In this case, it was released out into the canyons."

Hintze, along with New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) director of the Resource Protection Division Stephanie Stringer, gave legislators an update on cleanup efforts to the interim radioactive and hazardous materials committee last week.

Remediation of the contamination is slow work. Officials from the DOE, LANL and NMED have been working on the chromium plume for over fourteen years now. And, according to Hintze and Stringer, it will be at least another five years before the clean up effort will begin in earnest, when officials estimate a "final remedy" for the plume can be implemented — a full twenty years after the plume was first detected.

Identifying the plume

Hexavalent chromium is toxic and carcinogenic. It's the contaminant that Erin Brokovich famously fought against in the early 1990s in Hinkley, California. In Los Alamos, the plume was first discovered in 2005, when the DOE installed 32 regional monitoring wells in the area. Understanding the size and scope of the plume has been a difficult task. NMED estimates the plume to be about a mile long and a half mile wide, sitting atop the regional aquifer approximately 1,000 feet below ground level.



Source: NMED

But neither NMED nor DOE can know for certain where the exact boundaries of the plume lie underground, as indicated by the question marks in the map above.

"You don't know exactly where it is. If you could look down through the earth, you might be able to see [where it is]," Hintze said. "That is our best estimate, using modeling and all the data points we have. But we do not know exactly where it is, that's why we continue to collect data, from every well every sample we take."

To further complicate matters, the plume is not homogeneous, meaning it's not one large entity, but rather is comprised of pockets of contamination.

"What we're seeing is like three fingers," Hintze said. "Instead of treating it as one homogeneous plume, wasting more time, money and effort, if we can concentrate on the fingers, then we can get those areas cleaned up. The more data we're getting the more we're seeing that it's not homogenous."

Officials are also not sure how the plume is moving underground. Recent testing has indicated, for example, that there is a concentration of chromium in the northeast corner of the plume, beyond the R-70 regional monitoring well, which was installed earlier this year.

"The sample was higher than we were expecting it to be," Hintze said. "We used to draw this plume like a teardrop. When we got those samples, what that said was the plume has some sort of node, and that's because of the geology and the way water flows."

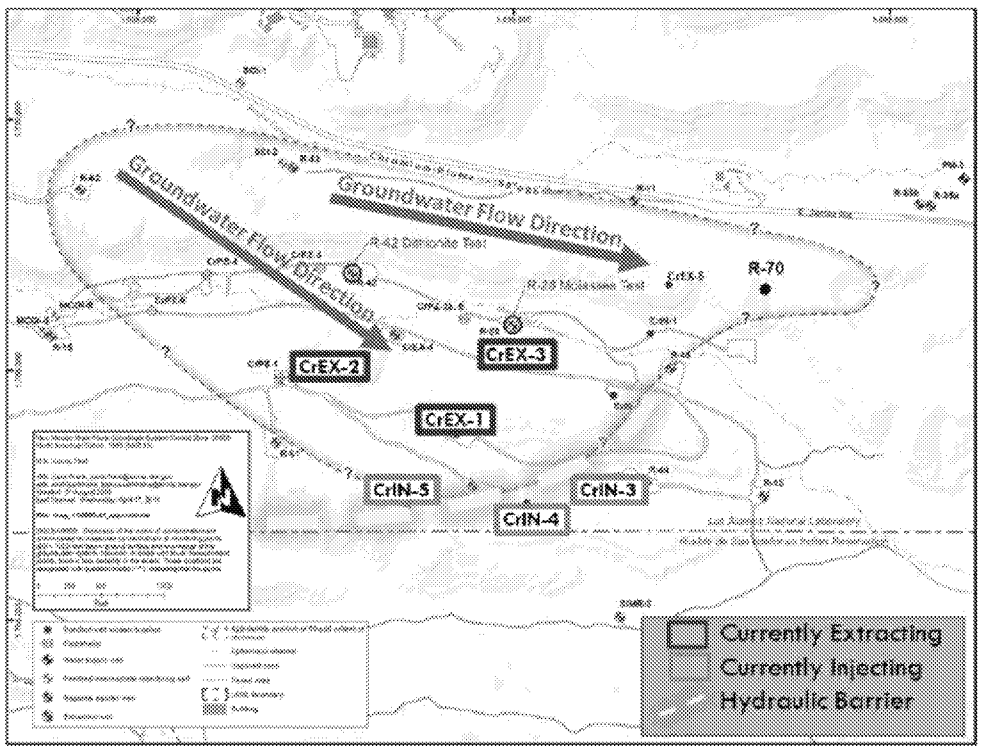
At present, the plume is estimated to be just a quarter mile from a Los Alamos County water supply well. But according to officials, the plume is moving so slowly that it does not present a threat to the county's water supply.

"This plume is only moving maybe two or three inches a year. That may take 30 years to get a quarter of a mile," Hintze said.

14 years later

Since its detection in 2005, NMED and DOE have collaborated on remedying the contamination, but the pace of the clean up is painfully slow, while the plume itself has been slowly migrating southward and eastward.

The two departments implemented an interim measure last year to contain the plume and stop its spread. That's done by extracting contaminated water through extraction wells located in areas with higher concentrations of hexavalent chromium, treating the water to remove the chemical, and then injecting the remediated water back into the aquifer through injection wells. The continuous operations have taken place along the southeastern boundary of the plume, where it pushes up against the boundary between LANL and San Ildefonso Pueblo.



Source: NMED

So far, NMED has deemed the interim measure a success. The "pump and treat" system has successfully stopped the plume from moving southward or crossing over onto Pueblo land. Officials have yet to begin the process along the eastern boundary, where the new node was recently discovered. The project is awaiting approval from the Office of the State Engineer for one of the wells before the pump and treat process can begin.

In the meantime, NMED and the technical core team have asked for additional wells to be installed so that officials can gain a fuller picture of the extent and shape of the plume.

"We want to make sure we have a comprehensive data set, we want to make sure we don't have any data gaps," Stringer said. "We have to dip these straws in to figure out what's going on, and these are very, very expensive straws."

The DOE has already spent $90 million on monitoring wells and pump and treat wells. But Hintze emphasized the interim measure is just that: an interim solution aimed at containing the plume, not cleaning up the contamination.

"The thing with 'pump and treats' is that eventually, they're a losing battle. You reach an area of diminishing returns. That's why we have another campaign for the final remedy," Hintze said.

"$90 million is nothing, because you spend what you need to do to make sure this is done correctly," he added.

(Still) heading towards a final remedy

Meanwhile, the technical core team is investigating two potential alternative methods for cleaning up the hexavalent chromium. One option is to inject molasses into the wells, another option is to use sodium dithionite. Both solutions have been shown to be effective at reducing hexavalent chromium to trivalent chromium, but Stringer said each alternative has its own set of pros and cons.

"We're evaluating the remedial options and looking at what's going to be our best choice to get the biggest bang for our buck and clean up the plume as quickly as possible," Stringer said.

NMED doesn't expect a decision on which solution to use until 2021, and the team won't begin implementing the solution — which likely will take years to complete — until 2025.

For state Rep. Christine Chandler, D-Los Alamos, the proposed timeline is disappointing.

"You hear this information and you don't feel comforted. It's real frustrating to hear about something in 2005, it's 2019, and we're still talking about interim measures," she said at the meeting. "I'm a little disappointed in terms of how responsive the federal government has been on this issue. Personally, I'd like to see a final solution before 2025. I'm probably going to be dead before we have a final [remedy]."

"We do feel that we have lost some time over the past few years because of the reductions in resources at both the federal and the state level. It's been debilitating," Stringer said in response to Chandler's comments. "The [NMED] Secretary [James Kenney] is definitely interested in increasing resources for all these high-priority sites. Given the current resources that we have, it doesn't happen immediately. But that is a goal and direction that the department is moving in."

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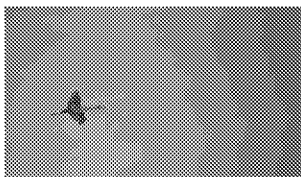

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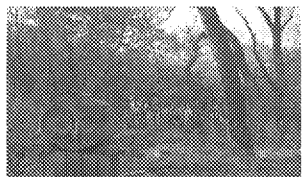

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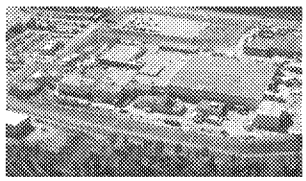

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